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ABSTRACT

Differences in readers' interpretations of a given text illustrate premises of the transactional or reader response theory of literature. The theory holds that: (1) meaning resides in the coming together of reader and text; (2) the reader affects the reading of the text and is affected by the text; and (3) there are potentially as many meanings to a text as there are readers. The reader-text relationship is dynamic, and changes not only from reader to reader but from one reading event to another in the same reader. Visualization activities, such as role playing, dramatization, situation expanding, and rhetorically real writing, serve to engage students in a text. Visualization forces students to consider a literary character's consciousness, motives, behaviors, and values directly and allows students to develop insights about their and others' experiences. It helps them think through characters' behavior to better assess and understand them. Students revise and build their interpretation of a literary work, rather than merely note and organize the teacher's knowledge. (One appendix of classroom activities is attached.) (SG)

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Title: Evoking/Interpreting Literature Through Visualizing Roles

First, a story.

A colleague and I were team teaching a course focusing on literature by and about women. We were discussing John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums." The discussion had moved from introductory responses about the central character's behavior, her apparent alienation from her husband, and her separation from his world of ranch management. Students had offered their perception of her feelings and of what had affected her. Disagreement of interpretation bubbled up, the students lining up generally on two sides: the heroine as a victim of social attitudes vs. self-victimization.

My colleague and I wound up on different "sides" of the response. In the heat of discussion, she turned to me and said, "What story are you reading anyway?" The class laughed--as did we--and, then, the discussion continued, sidestepping for a while to consider what about us, the readers, might be behind these differences.

Significance: the story that I read may not be akin to the story you read.

This classroom experience illustrates dynamically three significant premises of the transactional--reader response--theory of literature which is defined and elucidated in her books (Literature As Exploration and The Reader, the Text, the Poem): (1) that meaning resides in the coming together of reader and text; (2) that the reader affects the reading of the text and is affected by the text; and (3) that there are potentially as many meanings to a text as there are readers.

The experience also suggests the basic tenet of this approach--not to teach about literature but to engage students in the text. By helping them to identify their responses--initial and developing; by capitalizing on their empathy with characters; by bringing together seemingly loosely connected reactions; by considering the variant idea, this approach helps them to come to grips with their understanding of the text and of themselves--both as readers and as individuals.

Before focusing on the visualization activity, let me list several basic principles:

1. The reader is an active participant in the reading process, not a passive spectator.
2. The relationship between reader and text is dynamic, subject to variation not only from reader to reader but also from one reading event to another in the same reader.

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From letter:

*I'm writing to thank you for sending me the *Catcher in the Rye*. It is, in my opinion, one of the greatest books of all time. Until recently I never realized Holden is in some sort of mental institution while he's writing his story. I guess that's why Mr. Kraft (He is my I. B. English teacher) says we should read all good books twice. I never caught the line "I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got run down and had to come out here and take it easy."*

I caught the part about a year ago around Christmas and all, but the "taking it easy thing" slipped past me the first two times I read it. The third time I was reading the copy from you when I finally really understood that line.

3. Each reader approaches the text under the influence of past experiences and current circumstances or situation. Age, gender, ethnicity and race, past and present readings are all affective factors. So, too, are classroom atmosphere and teacher's assignments influential.
4. In a dynamic reading situation, readers make choices, both conscious and unconscious. From the array of words and situations, the readers will attend to some and minimize others. From the array of meanings and feelings that are conjured up, the readers select those that seem appropriate, that integrate with their dominant perception and purpose.
5. The created response becomes the realized experience of the reader.

Visualization activities which include such activities as role playing, dramatizations, situation expanding and rhetorically real writing are themselves based on two interlocking pedagogical principles: dialogue about a literary text should start where the students are (not where the teachers is) and student readers are often outsiders to the text. Further, they are not usually comprehending of why they are reacting as they do.

Visualization activities serve to engage students in the text. They inspire personal involvement with characters and situations. They help to bring about thoughtful consciousness in and among readers. Instead of being outsiders peering in, students assume the role of a character in the text--or they interact with a character. This role assumption forces them, if you will, to consider the character's consciousness, motives, behaviors and values directly. It forces them to live in the situation. What evolves from the activity in some measure acknowledges these basic understandings and pushes them into broader and deeper understandings.

It is pertinent to mention here that such activities are invaluable when the readers are crossing gender, ethnic and racial lines. They allow those outside the gender, racial or ethnic group they are reading about to become momentary insiders. Concomitantly, it allows those inside these groups to validate their own experiences.

I have chosen several literacy texts to model this approach. The example activities include both oral--usually group--and written--both individual and group.

- A. "The Snow Keeps Falling" is a short tale by Janet Campbell that addresses the old and continuing problem of Native American deculturation; part of the story takes place in a classroom in which the several Native American students, including the protagonist, are virtual outcasts; the exception to this is Teresa, the daughter of the tribal leader.
- B. Farewell to Manzanar, a novel by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, recounts the World War Two Japanese relocation experience; the novel stretches from the initial internment of the author's family, through the internment experiences, and her subsequent readjustment to the world outside the camp.
- C. Bless the Beasts and Children, a novel by Glendon Swarthout. In this widely taught story the five misfit protagonists struggle to establish positive identity for themselves as well as rescue the buffaloes from slaughter.
- D. "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perking Gilman, once read as a horror story, recounts the emotional collapse of a creative woman who is constrained--physically and emotionally--by her doctor-husband.
- E. "Home Burial" by Robert Frost details marital tension and misunderstanding of a young couple after the death of the couple's infant child

This type of reader-oriented activity helps students to build their responses to a text, to create a literary work. It helps them to develop their interpretive abilities.

Carefully shaped classroom activities, oral and written, rather than lectures or question--and--answer "discussion," allows students to develop insights about their own experiences and about the experiences of others. It helps them to think through the behavior of the characters into their mindset to better assess and understand them. It helps them to discover for themselves about relationships between themselves and others.

Such activities are often conducted in the context of discussion--discussion about the out comes of the activity itself--what it revealed--and discussion about the perceptions that generated the participants' choices. If other students are spectators, their responses and interpretations are also valuable in the learning process.

The process of exploring the evoked response is itself a learning experience. It cultivates a habit of mind that is provocatively thoughtful and democratic. The dynamics stimulate the expression and recognition of multiple viewpoints; they must be considered and reconsidered against each other, measured and tested against the text. And in considering reactions to the text, readers necessarily reconsider their own belief structures and ideas.

And, by reflecting on their thinking, readers come to understand what triggered their own responses, how these affected their interpretations, and how their responses might be affected by the insights of others. Students begin to recognize the role of their backgrounds, beliefs, and personalities in the reading act.

Teachers, focusing on the readers' experiences with the text, provide opportunities for them to identify and reflect on their reactions; invite them to compare reactions, to question themselves and others. Such classroom discourse promotes cross-fertilization of ideas among students. In an atmosphere of acceptance and honesty, students sense an appropriate, expressive reading or a limited or misdirected reading; they measure and receive the ideas of others, incorporating them in their own. Students revise and build their interpretation of the literary work, rather than merely note and organize the teacher's knowledge.

Let me come around full circle to my opening story. As a reader of John Steinbeck's "The Chrysanthemums," my reading of it will never quite be the same.

Classroom Activities:

"The Snow Keeps Falling" by Janet Campbell Hale.

1. Imagine that the teacher's car is stuck in the blizzard and that she is rescued by the boy and his father. She accompanies them to their home and stays for dinner. Role play the dinner conversation. **OR** Write the interior monologue of the three characters as they prepare and eat dinner. This may be a group activity.
2. Write a monologue of what Teresa is thinking during this class period.
3. Role play the discussion between father and son about staying in school.

Farewell to Manzanar by Jeanne Wakatsaki Houston

1. Write the headlines and the first two paragraphs of the newspaper accounts of the removal as it would appear in a Japanese American newspaper.
2. It is 1941. You are a member of a family that has been "rounded up" and is enroute to an internment camp (or you have just arrived). Having established your family role, enact a family conversation as you huddle in a train (or around a stove).
3. Imagine you are a student in the high school that the heroine is attending. Create a dialogue in which you and your friends discuss one of the high school situations (the band situation, the queen selection) **OR** Create a dialogue to discuss this (or another incident) that includes the heroine. Be prepared to present your dialogue.

"Home Burial" by Robert Frost

1. You are Amy, a consistent journal-diary writer. Write 3 entries in her diary over a span of some weeks, including the day the baby is buried. Other possible entries--during pregnancy, just after the child's birth, some weeks after the burial, the day of this poem.
2. Write an internal monologue for Frank (the husband) while he's digging the grave. his thoughts should include his insight about the fence-post.
3. Amy arrives at he neighbors, bursts into the kitchen where her friend and confidante Ellen is peeling apples. Write (and perhaps orally present) their dialogue (other friends may be there, too).

Bless the Beasts and Children by Glendon Swarthout

1. You are a camper in another cabin, an Apache. You are interviewed by a reporter about the runaways for a TV newscast. What would you say?
2. Pick a boy, pick a scene: create an interior monologue representing that boy's reactions to the situation.
3. Write and tape record the script of an evening news account of the final events.
4. A diary is discovered on Cotton's body. He has recorded his impressions of his friends during the trip. What does he say about _____? (This can be a group activity.)

"The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

1. Dorothea Dix and some of her fellow disciples, crusading to reform doctors' attitudes about their women patients' nervous disorders, "interview" Dr. John _____. Their purpose is to discover data, perhaps to instruct. Create this interview.
2. Compose the "position paper" Dorothea Dix prepares for dissemination to the media. She uses John's wife as her "active" example along with other data.